DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 183 FL 021 741

AUTHOR Bolitho, Rod
TITLE An Eternal Triangle? Roles for Teacher, Learners and Teaching Materials in a Communicative Approach.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 11p.; In Sarinee, Anivan, Ed. Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties. Anthology Series 24; see FL 021 739.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Compensation (Remuneration); Educational Strategies; Foreign Countries; Instructional Materials; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; Student Role; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Education; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the relationship between teacher, learner, and instructional materials in second language teaching using the communicative approach argues that the teacher is the primary element in instructional effectiveness, without which the other salient features of the approach, learner-centeredness and appropriate materials, can not be implemented. It is proposed that teachers can be enthusiastic about their classrooms and about new approaches if they have been encouraged in their training experiences and attained a degree of proficiency in the language they teach. In addition, socioeconomic security and stability are seen as essential to teacher effectiveness beyond a minimal standard. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

AN ETERNAL TRIANGLE? ROLES FOR TEACHER, LEARNERS, AND TEACHING MATERIALS IN A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

ROD BOLITHO

ED 366 183

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FL021741

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

WENG

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

AN ETERNAL TRIANGLE? ROLES FOR TEACHER, LEARNERS AND TEACHING MATERIALS IN A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

Rod Bolitho

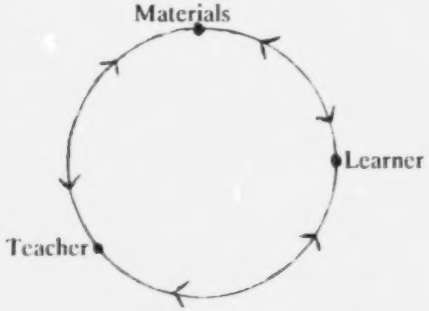
Over the last few months, I have on several occasions asked groups of language teachers to think about their relationship with their learners and their teaching materials, and to try to represent this relationship in a kind of symbolic diagram. The examples which follow are just a small number of the many permutations which have been offered, and the differing perceptions in these permutations have given rise to some fruitful debate:

(i)

Materials ----------> Teacher ----------> Learner

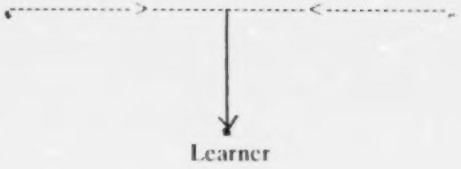
The most commonly chosen configuration, in which the teacher is seen as a mediator between the materials and the learner: the learner's only access to the materials is through the teacher.

(ii)



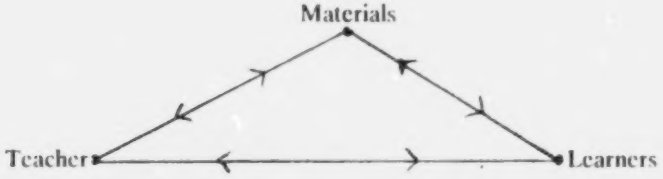
In this relationship, learning is seen as a constant flow, including the three important elements in the process in either order. The learner, in particular, either has direct access to the materials or can approach them through the teacher.

(iii) Materials Teacher



In this model, the teacher and the materials are seen as superordinate, conspiring (as one teacher put it only half-jokingly) to make the learner's life difficult.

(iv)



This relationship, described as 'the eternal triangle' by one teacher, has much in common with the circle in (ii) but it has been pointed out that triangles can have sides of different lengths (to imply distance) and that they can have an apex and a base, which can imply a hierarchy. More important to the teacher mentioned above was the tendency that teachers have to blame materials (or learners) when things go wrong, and the similar tendency displayed by learners to blame teachers (or materials).

Behind this apparently light-hearted exercise are some serious questions and some fairly far-reaching implications as we look at the current state of language teaching in a communicative context, and ways in which it might develop over the next few years.

Let us start with ***materials***, which means textbooks first and foremost. Here the weight of tradition is heavy. Ever since the advent of the printed word in the Middle Ages, textbooks in education have represented knowledge. The handing over of a set of textbooks by a teacher to a class is an act with symbolic significance: 'Here is your textbook. If you learn what is in it you will succeed' is the implication. This tradition still holds good in the overwhelming majority of educational contexts, worldwide.

Understandably, in such a tradition, a language teacher's preoccupation, shared with the learners, has been to complete the textbook by the end of the

allotted time. Wright (1987) puts it clearly enough:

> "One commonly held view is that the teaching of the materials is the primary goal; hence the attitude that the materials should cover the syllabus". (p.76)

Learners, in their turn, have been able to take the book home, to revise from it perhaps with the help of parents educated in the same tradition, and to go into end-of-year examinations confident of having covered all the materials necessary for success. Vocabulary lists and grammar rules could be learned by heart and applied in tests of linguistic competence. Set texts could be memorised and liberally quoted in literature examinations. Learning a language had much more to do with acquiring knowledge than with developing skills.

The development of a communicative approach to syllabus and materials design has, however, led to a fundamental redefinition of this traditional role for the textbook and this, in turn, has led to some questioning of traditional classroom roles. To quote Wright (1987) once again:

> "An alternative view is that teaching materials are only a means to an end. Teachers use certain materials because they help to promote language learning. Such a view would lead to the conclusion that teachers are best left to the fostering of a good classroom climate while the learners work on the materials". (p.76)

Such a view would produce an interesting variation on the diagrams used to introduce this paper. It is certainly at variance with the traditional view of the role of the textbook outlined above. But in a more traditional classroom setting than Wright envisages, the problem is exacerbated. The teacher distributes the (communicative) textbook at the start of the year. The learners receive it in the time-honoured way, believing they have in their hands the knowledge they need to succeed. It is at this significant point at the beginning of a course that a major misunderstanding occurs. Publishers, methodologists and textbook authors have been encouraging teachers to see a communicative textbook as a resource to draw on in teaching a course, even as a point of departure for classroom activities, rather than as a convergently conceived framework for study. But has anyone bothered to tell learners this? Or their parents for that matter? Five hundred years of educational tradition cannot be broken down overnight. As teachers, we are coming to accept the view that language learning has more to do with acquiring skills than with storing up knowledge, but do we discuss this with our learners? Do we explain how to make best use of a new-style coursebook? The early (mid seventies) communicative coursebooks ***were*** difficult for learners and teachers to use. Language was presented and packaged in different

ways, the organisation of text and exercise material was unfamiliar, and there were consequences for the teacher in classroom methodology. Many 'sacred cows' were called into question: stimulus-response drills, reading aloud, deductive approaches to grammar, are just three that spring to mind. Publishers and textbook writers soon had to respond to calls for more 'user-friendliness' in communicative materials: grammar summaries, consolidation units, cross-referencing between communicative and grammatical categories, word-lists and other important features began to be reintroduced within an overall communicative framework. Learner-training exercises have been introduced into many programmes and teaching materials. With such 'props' learners can once again use their coursebooks independently for preparation and revision. The message to publishers and textbook writers for the nineties is clear: teachers and learners need inspiring and interesting source materials, but learners also need solid practice and revision exercises to enable them to consolidate what they have learned.

Learners are entitled to have these minimum expectations of their materials, but they also deserve, whatever their age and background, to be brought into a discussion of their learning process and of the teaching approach which they are exposed to. In short, they need to know ***why*** they are asked to behave in certain ways in a language classroom, and ***how*** they can learn most effectively. Yet how many teachers go into classrooms and simply expect learners to do as they are asked without a word of explanation? In such situations, learners are too often tacitly required to suspend their disbelief and simply take part in an endless series of role-play, pair-work and group-work activities. The consequences can be quite severe, for learners and teacher alike. Learners who become disoriented by the increased responsibility they are asked to carry in a communicative classroom may become disruptive or unco-operative. Teachers blame the learners and the materials for this. But it is not as simple as that. Innovation in any context (including education) needs sensitive handling. Change which is simply handed down from on high will be resisted, whether the instigators be at ministry level (syllabus reform committees), in publishing houses or university departments. Communicative approaches ***have*** led us to consider our learners and to become more learner-centred in our classrooms, but it is a contradiction in terms to ***impose*** a learner-centred approach. Our learners must be valued and respected for the experience and opinions they bring to the language classroom. They must be brought into the rationale behind a particular approach to language study. For example they must understand how to achieve a reasonable balance between attention to accuracy and development of fluency. They must be trained to make the best of their learning opportunities, and to become, ultimately, autonomous users of a language. In all of this, they must have a clear idea of what they have a right to expect both from their teacher and their teaching materials.

But it is not only learners (and their parents or sponsors) who may resist change. Teachers, too, are justifiably cautious about new developments until their worth has been proved. The first decade of the 'communicative era' has been characterised by staffroom debate on the pros and cons of the new approach, usually as it appears in the materials rather than at the level of principle. There has been conflict between proselytes and those more reluctant to accept change without a rearguard action. One useful interim conclusion has been that a teacher must be sure of his/her new role before change can be accepted. Materials play a key part in a teacher's own view of this. Wright (1987) points out

> If a teacher teaches *through* materials, problems may occur. With a textbook as the 'master'
>
> 1. the learning objectives are the textbook's
> 2. there is little room for improvisation
> 3. teacher and learner roles may well be predetermined and contrary to expectations
>
> If the teacher teaches ***with*** the materials, with the textbook as servant, then he is freer to improvise and adapt the course of lessons to the needs of learners'. (p.96)

There is no doubt which of the two roles is easier to fulfil, but equally no doubt which is likely to be more satisfying. In the former case a teacher is simply the bearer of someone else's ideas; in the second case she/he works creatively with materials devised by someone who has never met this group of learners to make sure their needs are met. But the choice is not so straightforward as it may seem, and the teacher not as free in making it as she/he might like to be. Li Xiaojou (1984) writing about the impact of the communicative approach in China, had this to say about the teacher's dilemma:

> ".... the teacher's role in a communicative class is completely different from that in any other type of class. In China, the tradition of the teacher occupying the centre in the classroom is still very much alive and teachers ..... naturally feel a bit uprooted when they are removed from that position. Some of them are taking it pretty easy though, because now they don't have to prepare a 'lecture' for every class, or supply the 'correct' answer to every exercise the students do. Other, more conscientious teachers feel somewhat guilty because they 'have nothing to do in class' and don't think they are doing their duty".

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Many of the misunderstandings about a communicative teacher's role, including views which an uninitiated learner might quickly sympathise with, are expressed only too clearly in Li Xiaojou's comment. A teacher's own need to be seen to be doing her/his job in a classroom may ultimately prevent her/him from stepping gracefully but purposefully to one side to allow learners to get the practice they so badly need in order to develop their communicative ability. Widdowson (1987) and others have written about this role problem faced by both teachers and learners. Seen in Li's terms, then, a teacher's main problem in adapting to the communicative approach is psychological. A Hungarian teacher, Peter Medgyes, identifies a different, but equally troublesome, conundrum:

> "Most non-native teachers of English have split personalities. We find it a hopelessly perplexing task to teach this language which, like any other foreign language, is full of mystery to the non-native speaker. Sooner or later, every one of us regrets having chosen this career. Four or five hours a day, we have to face our students, attempting to teach something we ourselves invariably have a shaky knowledge of." (Medgyes, 1983)

In a communicative classroom where learners' linguistic output is not always predictable or subject to tight, accuracy-related controls, demands on a teacher's spontaneous ability in English are far greater. And in order to work with a textbook which has no overt grammar component, a teacher (as many native speakers have found to their cost) needs a greater, not lesser, degree of familiarity with the structure of English. In Western Europe, this has led to a burgeoning in the popularity of language refresher courses for non-native teachers, but these are not easily available to teachers working in politically, economically or geographically less favourable environments. To summarise here, a teacher was traditionally seen as an instructor (following a textbook and/or syllabus), a judge of correctness, an imparter of knowledge and the main initiator in a language classroom. Now (according to the various writers on methodology), he/she has to function as an interpreter of textbook and syllabus, an organiser of communicative activities, a co-communicator (with learners), a facilitator of learning, a resource (making knowledge available and fostering skills), a provider of support and security, a listener as well as a speaker (a big step, this, for many teachers!), and in many cases a materials writer and a tester or assessor. All this makes huge demands on a teacher who has almost certainly not been prepared for such a wide variety of roles on an initial training course. It is hardly surprising that many have felt threatened by the fresh challenges which have come with the communicative approach. Add to this the traditional insecurities in a profession bedevilled in many countries by low pay and low social status, even (in the era of high technology) by a feeling that language teaching is

in itself a Cinderella subject, and it becomes easier to understand why teachers resist change and cling to patterns of behaviour which protect their standing at least in the classroom and the staffroom. Ultimately, it is the teacher who has to go in and face a group of more or less co-operative learners early on a Monday morning at a time when textbook writers are often still in bed and many a ministry official is just settling down to her/his desk with the first cup of coffee of the morning. Teachers can only work successfully from a basis of personal security. If they are destabilised by change as well as wrestling with problems of low pay and self-esteem, they will not be able to give of their best and may well opt for a minimalist survival approach, which would be inimical to the development of communication in the classroom.

All of this naturally has implications for the way society views its language teachers. But there are also consequences for teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, and I'd like to examine these briefly here in the light of one more informal finding. Over recent months, I have asked groups of teachers and learners in several countries to list characteristics of the teachers they have liked most and least in their experience as learners. The positive and negative characteristics which they listed could all be grouped under three broad headings: ***knowledge*** ('ignorant', 'did not know his subject'; 'well-read', 'an authority on the English language'); ***professional skills*** ('couldn't keep order', 'couldn't teach'; 'really got us interested in English', 'never wasted a moment') and ***personal qualities*** ('unfair', 'sarcastic', 'hypocritical'; 'treated us with respect', 'patient', 'accessible'). It will come as no surprise to readers to learn that the contributions under 'personal qualities' far outnumbered those under the other headings. From a teacher educator's point of view, this could be bad news, reinforcing as it does the old adage that good teachers are born, not made. A more positive view might be that teacher educators could look at the design of their courses to see whether they allow scope for personal growth alongside the acquisition of knowledge and the development of professional skills. I suspect that many initial training courses focus too heavily on knowledge, and too insistently on teaching skills, on the grounds, perhaps, that the course represents the first and only opportunity for novice teachers to acquire these. And there is a danger that a teacher who is 'pumped up' with knowledge on a course will seek to inflict a knowledge-based approach on learners ('if you don't learn the rules of grammar, you'll never be able to speak English'). Worse still, if the language studies and/or methodology components of a training course are delivered by lecture, what price those trainees' ability to organise a classroom on communicative lines later on? In short, training courses which advocate communicative language teaching give trainers an excellent opportunity to practise what they preach. There can be no doubting the value of experiential learning. Any theory relevant to language teaching can be derived from practical experience on a course. There is no excuse for the gratuitous purveying of knowledge or theory

to teachers. David Nunan highlights these points in a list of principles for teacher development (Nunan, 1989) which could be applied to any sort of teacher training course.

But there is more to it than this. To prepare language teachers for the wide variety of roles now expected of them, some of which were listed earlier in this paper, and to help them to develop a more robust professional profile, a frame work for long-term development, as well as for initial training, needs to be established. Both the content and the methodology of in-service training courses need to be reviewed and updated regularly. A teacher who wishes to take a minimalist view might, for example, question the value of a course involving materials writing or syllabus design by maintaining: 'I'm a teacher, not a materials or syllabus designer. My job is simply to teach what others provide'. This view reduces language teaching to the level of, say, technician level instruction from a manual. Small wonder if a teacher holding such a view suffers from a low self-image and resists change. A teacher who understands the principles of syllabus design and learns how to write materials is not only better equipped to respond to immediate classroom needs, but is also far better able to evaluate, critically and productively, any syllabus or materials she/he is asked to work with.

In early 1989, I worked for three months with a group of eighteen experienced Indian teachers of English on the first phase of a project aimed at redesigning the syllabus, materials and examinations for ninth and tenth grades in English-medium schools. They started very low on self-belief and feeling rather overwhelmed by the enormity of the task they were undertaking. By the end of the three-month programme, they had not only designed an outline syllabus and reproduced the first sample units, but had come to realise their own capabilities to the extent that many of them could not wait to return and share their ideas with colleagues back at home. Within weeks of their return to India, the first reports of field trials and of workshops run for local colleagues began to arrive in my mail. The syllabus and materials-writing process had raised, directly or incidentally, almost every major issue related to their teaching, their status and their professional relationships. All these matters (and many more) were discussed on the course. The learning was almost exclusively experiential but there was no attempt to dismiss or evade theory. Many of the teachers grew visibly in confidence and stature through the experience of presenting their ideas and materials to colleagues and course tutors in seminars, and having them valued, and thoughtfully evaluated. Pierre Kouraogo, writing about a curriculum project in Burkina Faso, endorses this view:

> "Teachers, heads and inspectors unanimously agreed that teachers should play a more active role in all aspects of curriculum renewal". (Kouraogo, 1987)

A teacher who has been involved in this way will be far better equipped to take part in helpful dialogue with publishers and textbook writers about materials, with ministry officials about syllabus, and with learners and their parents about change and the reasons for it.

But change can be achieved through and with the assistance of teachers only if they themselves have experienced it in a positive way on in-service training courses. You cannot expect a teacher with ten years' experience to enjoy the experience of being made to feel how little she/he knows when attending lectures by an expert on such a course. The only valid starting point is that which is provided by the collective experience of the participants. Ramani (1987) convincingly describes a consultative methodology for in-service training which puts this simple principle into practice. Only when it becomes a matter of course for teachers to be listened to with respect, to have their worries and professional insecurities appreciated rather than glossed over, to be encouraged to explore their potential in areas like materials, will the complicated relationships and roles in the 'eternal triangle' be more open and easier for all concerned to handle. The advent of communicative language teaching has made this task even more challenging, especially in contexts where noisy innovation in language classrooms may lead school principals and colleagues from other disciplines to react with hostility or, at best, scepticism. We have all begun to travel along this road to change. It is an inevitable consequence of the communicative approach we have chosen, but if we really believe in the approach, then it is a consequence we cannot escape. That is a true challenge for us over the next decade.

REFERENCES

*KOURAOGO, P. 1987. **Curriculum Renewal and INSET in Difficult Circumstances in English Language Teaching**. Journal 41/3.*

*LI, Xiaojou. 1984 **In Defence of the Communicative Approach in English Language Teaching**. Journal 38/1.*

*MEDGYES, P. 1983. **The Schizophrenic Teacher in English Language Teaching**. Journal 37/1.*

*NUNAN, D. 1989. **A Client Centred Approach to Teacher Development in English Language Teaching**. Journal 43/2.*

*RAMANI, E. 1987. **Theorizing from the Classroom in English Language Teaching**. Journal 41/1.*

*WIDDOWSON, H G. 1987. **The Roles of Teacher and Learner in English Language Teaching**. Journal 41/2.*

WRIGHT, T. 1987. Roles of Teachers and Learners. Oxford: Oxford University Press.